



## A Double Take on Early Christianity

MIKE AQUILINA

Tracking the growth of Christianity 2,000 years ago is an ambitious undertaking for a sociologist. But Rodney Stark found it irresistible. Reading recent histories of early Christianity, he began to do some number-crunching. Soon, he says, it was a consuming "hobby." And, before long, he had written a best-selling book, *The Rise of Christianity*.

What he found in his study of the first Christian centuries was an astonishing growth rate in the number of Christians of 40 percent per decade. From a small band of twelve, the Church had grown to 6 million people by 300 A.D. Stark maintains that the Emperor Constantine did not so much ensure Christianity's success as acknowledge it. Constantine's edict of toleration in 313 was overdue recognition that the Church had already won the empire.

But Stark is most interested in how the West was won. Contrary to pious histories, he holds that most growth came from individual conversions, and from the merchant and upper classes rather than the poor. Contrary to secular feminist pieties, he makes the case that most converts were women, that women benefited greatly from conversion, and that women were leaders in the early Church.

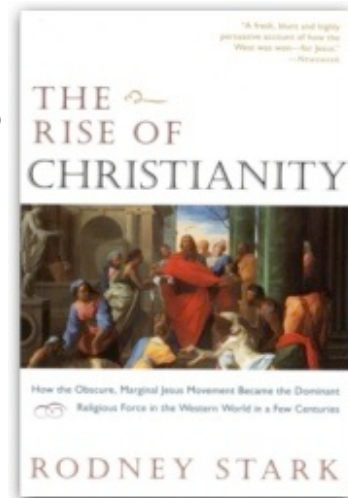
He also shows the remarkable effects of charity on Church growth. Christians, he demonstrates, were much more likely to survive epidemics because they cared for one another. And the pagans who received Christian care were much more likely to become Christians. In times of epidemic, Stark says, pagan priests and doctors were among the first to leave town.

Stark's book vividly describes the misery of ordinary citizens of the pagan world. Most lived in cramped, smoky tenements with no ventilation or plumbing. Life expectancy was around 30 years for men and perhaps much lower for women. Hygiene was minimal. Medical care was more dangerous than disease, and disease often left its victims disfigured or dead. The human body was host to countless parasites, and tenements were infested by pests. For entertainment, people thronged to the circuses to see other people mutilated and killed.

Pagan marriage was no respite. Greco-Roman women suffered in predatory relationships rife with contraception, abortion, and unnatural sexual acts. But Christian marriage was a different story. Christian husbands and wives tended to love one another, as their religion required. Their mutual affection, Stark says, and their openness to fertility led to more children, and thus to a still higher growth in converts for the early Church.

Stark demonstrates that Christian doctrine, hope and charity transformed the Roman Empire -- one person at a time.

Of *The Rise of Christianity*, the Vatican's semi-official newspaper said: "It is ironic yet satisfying to find sociology, so often used to attack dogmatic Christianity, now objectively confirming some of the claims that Christianity has made for itself."



An agnostic, Stark teaches at the University of Washington in Seattle and lives nearby with his wife. Stark was interviewed by Mike Aquilina originally for *Our Sunday Visitor*.

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**Aquilina:** *You call The Rise of Christianity a "hobby." What attracted you to church history rather than building ships in bottles?*

**Rodney Stark:** My hobbies -- with the exception of being a sports fan -- always involve books. I read some recent histories and said, "This is nice stuff." I read more and said, "I've got something I can contribute here, because their history is good, but their social science isn't."

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*Most Christians would find your work iconoclastic. You've undermined a number of received truths of church histories.*

**RS:** I don't think anyone should take offense. My findings make the Christian accomplishment seem all the more wonderful.

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*One tradition you question is that Christianity was primarily a movement of the poor. Why?*

**RS:** In the upper-class and senatorial families, and even the imperial family, there were many women who were Christians, even early on. In the 1920s we found a paving block dedicated to Erastus, whom Paul mentioned in his Letter to the Corinthians, and the block shows that Erastus was city treasurer. And there's reason to believe that we have in the early Church a quite literate group. When you read the New Testament, for example, ask: Who are these people talking to? The language there is the language used by educated people.

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*You describe the everyday misery of the ancient world. Did Christianity change that?*

**RS:** It made it a lot more bearable. The Church didn't clean up the streets. Christians didn't put in sewers. So you still had to live with a trench running down the middle of the road, in which you could find dead bodies decomposing. But what Christians did was take care of each other. Their apartments were as smoky as the pagan apartments, since neither had chimneys, and they were cold and wet and they stank. But Christians loved one another, and when they got sick they took care of each other. Someone brought you soup. You can do an enormous amount to relieve those miseries if you look after each other.

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*You also argue for steady growth by individual conversions rather than by mass conversions. Why?*

**RS:** We don't have a single documented case of mass conversion. Yes, there's the passage in the Book of Acts, and I'm not one of these people who say, "Don't trust the Bible." But you've got to understand what people meant by numbers in those times. Numbers were rhetorical exercises. You'd say a million when you really meant a hundred. What you're really saying is "lots." In Acts, I think the numbers are meant to say, "Look, wonderful things are happening." If the historical demographers are right, Jerusalem had about 25,000 people in it at the time. So if you start talking about eight or ten thousand converts, that's a little bit out of scale.

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*What about forced conversions?*

**RS:** There weren't any in the time I'm talking about. Constantine didn't cause the triumph of Christianity. He rode off it. In fact, I'll go so far as to say he had many harmful effects. I don't believe

establishment is good for churches. It gets them involved in the worldly realm in ways that are unsuitable and corrupting. By the end of Constantine's reign, we see people competing madly to become bishops because of the money. After that, Christianity was no longer a person-to-person movement.

You look at the spread of Christianity beyond the empire, and you see that it was almost entirely by treaty and by baptizing kings. I think one reason medieval church attendance was so bad in Scandinavia and Germany was that these people weren't really Christians. If it hadn't been for the establishment of the Church, they might have been. Their lands would have become Christian because many people would have gone door-to-door to make Christians out of them -- and then baptized the king. It was bad for the Church. I think the current pope would agree with me; I think most medieval popes would have me burned for saying this.

American Catholics can understand it, though. They know how good it was for the Church to have to fight for its life in the United States. The old Protestant story was that the priest met the boat, and you had another boatload of Catholics. But that's not true; those people weren't used to going to church or contributing money. They had to be turned into Catholics. It was a remarkable feat. Posed with a challenge, the Church rose to it very well, and the American Church became a very strong Church, compared to the Latin American Church.

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*The received tradition is that many Christians were martyred. Yet you say that blood witnesses were few.*

**RS:** There's a consensus among historians that the numbers weren't large at all, and that we may know the name of just about every single martyr. The Romans decided to attack the movement from the top. This would have worked with other religions because there was no bottom to paganism. Paganism was really temples on a shopping mall, and people were very casual about which ones they patronized. If the Romans knocked off the chief priest and took away government subsidy, a pagan temple would fold up.

So the empire went after Christianity the same way, thinking, "If we butcher the bishops, things will take care of themselves." Of course, it didn't work because there were 92 guys waiting in line to be bishop. That's what you get with a mass movement.

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*Does this minimize the traditional notion that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church"?*

**RS:** Not at all. One thing about religious truths is that we have to take them on faith, and faith needs reassurance. What's more reassuring than noticing that some other people, whom you admire, are so certain that it's all true that they're willing to go the ultimate mile?

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*You seem to argue that Christianity was an overwhelmingly good social force for women.*

**RS:** It was! Christian women had tremendous advantages compared to the woman next door, who was like them in every way except that she was a pagan. First, when did you get married? Most pagan girls were married off around age 11, before puberty, and they had nothing to say about it, and they got married to some 35-year-old guy. Christian women had plenty of say in the matter and tended to marry around age 18.

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*What about in the Church itself? How did women find their place?*

**RS:** Women were leaders in the early Church. Paul makes that clear. And we have Pliny's letter in which he says that among the people he's tortured were two "deaconesses." We're not helped by Bible translations that render "deaconess" as "deacon's wife." I'm not saying the Church was ordaining women in those days. Of course it wasn't. But women were leaders, and probably a disproportionate number of the early Christians were women.

Some of their husbands may have been there, but the wives were there. There's another thing we don't understand: In every single society of which we have any evidence at all, women are more religious than men. We're not sure why. But what that has meant is that religious movements are disproportionately female. That's certainly turned up in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when we have good numbers. People in the early Church remarked on it back then. The early church fathers noticed that the movement had more women.

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*Even Christian historians tend to discount stories of the miraculous and minimize the veracity of early Church documents. Yet you accept the record to a remarkable degree.*

**RS:** People in the patristics field recently were hammering me for naively accepting early accounts. One woman in particular mentioned the early Church's rules against abortion and female infanticide. She said that I didn't seem to understand that these prohibitions served all kinds of polemical purposes. Well, of course I know that, but I guess I'm so naive as to believe that groups that constantly hammer against something are more opposed to it than groups that, in their official writings, say that the same thing is laudable and wonderful and that we ought to do it.

From Plato and Aristotle on, the classical philosophers were advocating abortion. And infanticide was fine with them, too. Of course there were Christians who didn't obey, just like there are Mormons who chew tobacco. But the fact of the matter is: most of them don't. The same thing applies here.

And as for miracles: listen, people do get healed -- spontaneously and, it would seem, miraculously. There's not a physician on earth who would deny that. What is the agency? I don't know. But to deny that people in tabernacles around the United States are getting healed is simply wrong. There's no reason to deny that these things happen just because we don't share the definitions put on them by the people of another time or place.

Somebody at Harvard Divinity School might say, "That wasn't a miracle. It was a spontaneous remission." "Spontaneous remission" is the way the experts say, "We don't have the slightest idea what happened." The most hard-nosed scientist has no reason to doubt that miracles took place in the early Church. The opinions of the village atheist are as fundamentalist as anything any Baptist ever believed.

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*You conclude your book by saying that "what Christianity gave to its converts was nothing less than their humanity." What do you mean?*

**RS:** If you look at the Roman world, you have to question whether

half the people had any humanity. Going to the arena to enjoy watching people tortured and killed doesn't strike me as healthy. I'm a big football fan, and I see that, when some player gets hurt, they bring out an ambulance and the doctors take twenty minutes to get him off the field. They don't want people hurt out there. But these people did. They'd shout, "Shake him! Jump up and down on him!"

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*Was Christianity's contribution just the elimination of the circus?*

**RS:** No, it was a new idea. Among the pagans, you get the sense that no one took care of anyone else except in the tribal way. It's what we're seeing today in the Balkans -- you take care of your brothers, and you kill everybody else. Christianity told the Greco-Roman world that the definition of "brother" has got to be a lot broader. There are some things you owe to any living human being.

*Does it concern you today that blood sports and violent movies are on the upswing, and that abortion and infanticide are back in force?*

**RS:** It doesn't surprise me. It offends me. For more than a century we managed to have a period of considerable public decency. Now, maybe we're sliding back to what's more typical. I blame the courts, which say we can't censor anything but religion. The fact of the matter is, when I was a kid, there were rules about what you could and couldn't put in the mail or show in the movies.

Some of the rules may have been a bit much, but where do you stop? Where do you put your limits? If you don't set them pretty tight, pretty soon they're blowing people's heads off. It's not, for example, that people didn't get killed in movies in the forties, but there wasn't this enormous immorality. Evil was to be punished before the movie was over. And they didn't show all this gratuitous gore. There are people who get turned on by this stuff, and we are helping to build monsters.

*You say that Christianity succeeded in part because of its high moral standards. Today, however, many churches are lowering the bar to make religion more popular. How would you analyze their efforts?*

**RS:** They're death wishes. People value religion on the basis of cost, and they don't value the cheapest ones the most. Religions that ask nothing get nothing. You've got a choice: you can be a church or a country club. If you're going to be a church, you'd better offer religion on Sunday. If you're not, you'd better build a golf course, because you're not going to get away with being a country club with no golf course. That's what happened to the Episcopalians, Methodists, Congregationalists, Unitarians and, indeed, to some sectors of Catholicism.

*Are Christians waking up to that?*

**RS:** Most denominations are tightening up, and the reason is they're running out of members. The young clergy have religious motives that their elders didn't necessarily share. It was a much better job forty years ago. If you look at Catholic religious orders, you'll find that some are recovering and some new ones are growing. The only ones growing are those that have joint living arrangements instead of everybody living out on their own; that have organized worship; and that have some distinctive dress, so you can recognize them on the street as not just your average social worker or schoolteacher. That's a QED. If religion gets too cheap, nobody pays the price.

Here's an example: Do you really need to have hamburgers on Friday? Getting rid of meatless Fridays was a dreadful error the Church made. When I was a kid -- in a town that was 40 percent Catholic and

60 percent Protestant -- meatless Friday was an enormously important cultural marker. Every Friday reminded you who was like you and who wasn't like you -- and it did this in a way that wasn't harmful to either side.

Our high-school football games were always played on Friday nights. After the game, you took your girlfriend to the drive-in restaurant. And, around midnight, you could hear the Catholic kids count down to twelve and then shout, "Hamburger!" And everybody would laugh. It was a little social ritual that left Catholics with an enormous sense of solidarity. We thought hamburgers were the big denominational difference.

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*What do you make of the current pope?*

**RS:** Here's someone who knows what it was like for the first Christians -- who knows what it is to fight for his Church's life. If an Italian bishop wants to know how many Catholics are in his diocese, he looks in the census books for the number of people who live nearby. A bishop in Communist Poland knew that the census and the number of Catholics were not the same number, and that it's important to get yourself some Catholics if you want to have a Church. Whether you agree with him or you don't, it's very clear this pope is a holy man, that he's on a mission.

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*You once wrote that you're "not religious as that term is conventionally understood."*

**RS:** That's true, though I've never been an atheist. Atheism is an active faith; it says, "I believe there is no God." But I don't know what I believe. I was brought up a Lutheran in Jamestown, North Dakota. I have trouble with faith. I'm not proud of this. I don't think it makes me an intellectual. I would believe if I could, and I may be able to before it's over. I would welcome that.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

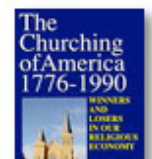
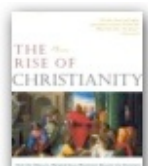
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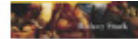
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## THE AUTHOR

Having begun his career as a newspaper reporter, Rodney Stark took his Ph.D. in sociology from the University of California, Berkeley where he also held an appointment as a research sociologist at the Survey Research Center. He left Berkeley to become



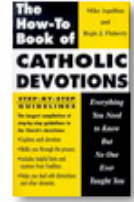
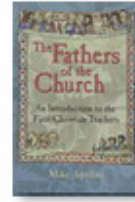
Professor of Sociology and of Comparative Religion at the University of Washington. In 2004 he became



University Professor of the Social Sciences at Baylor University. Among Rodney Stark's 26 published books are: *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal, Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force*, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success*, *One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism*, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*, and *Exploring the Religious Life*.

**THE AUTHOR**

Mike Aquilina is vice president of the [St. Paul Center for Biblical Theology](#) and co-host, with Scott Hahn, of several television series on EWTN. He is the author or co-author of *Love in the Little Things: Tales of Family Life*, *Living the Mysteries: A Guide for Unfinished Christians*, *Fathers of the Church: An Introduction to the First Christian Teachers*, *The Way of the Fathers: Praying with the Early Christians*, and *Praying in the Presence of Our Lord: With St. Thomas Aquinas*. See Mike Aquilina's "The Way of the Fathers" blog [here](#).



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